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ABSTRACT

When teachers experience the process of playwriting, it focuses their attention on the significant problems of form, voice, and audience that will confront their students. Teachers were assigned to overhear and record an argument, then use that argument as the basis for a one-act radio, television, or stage play. An argument can supply conflict, a protagonist, an antagonist, and fresh, real material; but the argument is only part of the basic dramatic structure. The writer must invent the rest through a combination of logic and imagination. Some problems encountered by the teachers when developing the "form" involved the locating and recording of an argument; then extending that argument to include exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Problems found when selecting the "voice" involved the decision to express an impartial or prejudiced attitude toward the protagonist and antagonist. Problems experienced when selecting the "audience" centered on the need to make the final product entertaining while addressing the limitations of radio, television, and stage. (JW)

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TEACHERS AS PLAYWRIGHTS: PROBLEMS OF FORM, VOICE, AND AUDIENCE

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TEACHERS AS PLAYWRIGHTS: PROBLEMS OF FORM,
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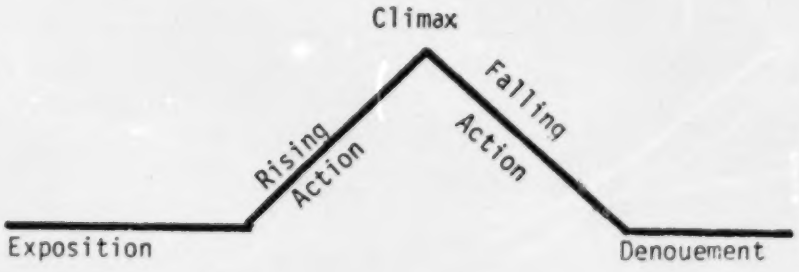
The assignment was to overhear and record from memory an argument and then use that argument as the basis for a short one-act radio, television or stage play. How these teachers eventually located and hazardously recorded an argument is the subject of another article. Nevertheless, the argument proved to be a useful prewriting exercise for the beginning playwrights. First, the argument supplies conflict, a protagonist and an antagonist--all prerequisite for drama. Second, an argument provides fresh, real material. Third, transforming the argument to drama highlighted crucial problems in dealing with form, voice, and audience.

Form

As most of these teachers discovered, the overheard argument could not in itself be a play. The argument is inchoate; a play is complete. In real life a husband and wife bickering over drinks and dinner leave the restaurant without settling anything; in a play, the man and woman should resolve the argument in some way. In effect, the argument is only a part of a basic dramatic structure; the writer invents the rest through a combination of logic and imagination. Using the following simplistic diagram students were able to determine



have to resolve it. In real life, the resolution may occur immediately, later, or never. In a play the resolution has to occur immediately--thus, the need for falling action. The climactic act, whether it be a thrown drink, a shattered picture, or a hostile revelation, must be dealt with, or at least discussed and reflected on; otherwise neither the climax nor the argument that produced it are significant.

Denouement

The play should end with a "nice touch," an ironic twist, a humorous remark, or a wry glimpse into the future. Students found this element most difficult to deal with, and some refused to. Generally, students like "the last laugh" or "the parting insult" as the most workable denouement.

Voice

When students first observed and recorded their dialogs, they were impartial third persons. However, by studying their texts, they found themselves involved in the conflict, wanting to side with one character, or both, or neither. These attitudes became important because they affected the play's development, specifically how they wanted the characters to "look" at the play's conclusion. While at a restaurant one student had observed an abusive husband denigrate his wife to the point that the student became angry; in the resulting play, the wife overcame abuse by intelligence and manipulative language--in beautiful irony. Another student had observed patients and visitors interacting in a solarium at a mental hospital. She

found herself so alien to the situation that her play was as impersonal and as detached as was her observation.

Audience

Perhaps no mode of writing is more audience focused than drama. Drama is, after all, entertainment. The student playwrights were, in a sense, audience aware when they transformed an argument into a dramatic form, something that would make the mundane seem special and interesting. Again, they were audience aware as they tried to make their attitudes shine through the resolution of the conflict. However, the medium of the drama demands extreme consideration of audience. A radio audience, for example, relies on dialog, sound effects, music, and, occasionally, a narrator in order to comprehend drama. To adjust to the limitations of radio, a student would have to alter dialog to add necessary visual information:

Original Observation	Radio Script
Woman: Now, wait a minute. Who do you think you're talking to? (Slams down cup, spills coffee)	Music: Two harsh chords.
	Ann: Now wait a minute.
	Sound: Cup hitting saucer.
Man: Why get so defensive? At least listen to me. (He tries to hold her hand; she pulls away).	Anne: Who do you think you're talking to?
	Tom: Look, you've spilled your coffee. (pause) Why get so defensive? At least listen to me.
	Anne: Don't you dare try to hold my hand.

The television audience, unlike the radio audience, supplies little in imagination. Writers have to plan for everything seen and everything heard. One teacher in class decided to produce the play in the University's TV studio. To her surprise, the TV camera was not as flexible as she had imagined; nor did her imagined conception of her play equal what her colleagues saw when it premiered in class. The radio script segment previously presented might look like this transformed to a television script:

Music: sweet, flowing, innocuous piped-in restaurant music.

Camera: Close-up on Anne's face as she clenches her teeth.

Anne: Now, wait a minute.

Camera: Cut to table with Tom sitting across from her.

Anne: (slams cup on saucer spilling coffee) Who do you think you're talking to?

Camera: Cut to Tom's face.

Tom: Why get so defensive?

Camera: Cut to table.

Tom: (reaches for her hand; she pulls her hand away) At least try to listen to me.

Unlike radio, and to a certain extent the stage, television permits the playwright to control the audience's attention by focusing it. The camera, then, becomes the eye of the narrator, and the "eye" can take in the same scene with varying effects. Consider the varied audience response to Anne and Tom's argument with each of the following sets of camera directions:

1. During entire argument camera fixes on table, taking in both Anne and Tom. [objectivity]
2. Close-up on Anne's face during entire argument. [Sympathies with Anne]
3. Close-up on Tom's face during entire agrument. [Sympathies with Tom]
4. When Anne speaks cut to Anne's face; when Tom speaks cut to Tom's face. [Audience follows argument]
5. When Anne speaks cut to Tom's face; when Tom speaks cut to Anne's face. [Audience follows effects of argument]

Unlike television, a stage audience views a fixed arena of action, like the objective camera position described earlier. To control an audience's focus, a playwright uses physical movement. Here is Anne and Tom's argument staged:

Anne: (returns to table with a full cup of coffee, stands glaring down at Tom who is still seated) Now wait a minute. (She slams cup down on saucer and spills coffee. Tom jumps up, startled) Who do you think you're talking to?

Tom: Why get so defensive? (He takes her hand but she wrenches it back.) At least try to listen to me.

Conclusion

The teachers as playwright project was challenging. Every teacher wrote a one-act play script, ready for radio, television or stage

production. One television play was produced and shown in class. Experiencing the process of playwriting focused teachers' attention on significant problems of form, voice, and audience that would, no doubt, confront their students. The following table summarizes the problems the students encountered.

Problems Teachers Encountered as Playwrights

FORM	VOICE	AUDIENCE
1. Locating and recording an argument 2. Extending the argument to include a. exposition b. rising action c. climax 1. violent action 2. revealed secret 3. pent-up feelings d. falling action e. denouement	Attitude toward protagonist and antagonist a. Impartial b. Prejudiced	1. Need to be entertained 2. Mundane must be interesting, special 3. Limitations of media a. Radio reliance on 1. music 2. sound effects 3. narrator 4. dialog indicating what audience cannot see b. Television on camera's point of view c. Stage 1. fixed set 2. reliance on physical movement for focus